

PATENT
5681-59200
P9275

I hereby certify that this correspondence, including the attachments, is being deposited with the United States Postal Service, Express Mail – Post Office to Addressee, Receipt No. EV318247498US, in an envelope addressed to the Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks, Alexandria, VA 22313-1450, on the date shown below.

11-25-2003
Date of Mailing


Derrick Brown

**SPATIAL DITHERING TO OVERCOME LIMITATIONS IN RGB COLOR
PRECISION OF DATA INTERFACES WHEN USING OEM GRAPHICS
CARDS TO DO HIGH-QUALITY ANTIALIASING**

Invented by

Nathaniel David Naegle

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

5 This invention relates generally to the field of computer graphics and, more particularly, to a graphics system which uses spatial dithering to compensate for a loss of sample precision due to buffering and transmission through data interfaces.

2. Description of the Related Art

10

 High-quality anti-aliasing involves the generation of a set of samples, and filtering the samples (with an anti-aliasing filter) to generate pixels. It would be desirable if industry standard graphics cards could be used to form a graphics system capable of performing high-quality anti-aliasing. However, industry standard graphics cards
15 generally end up throwing away one or more bits of computed color precision in the process of buffering color values in their internal frame buffers and outputting the color values through data interfaces (such as the Digital Video Interface). There exists a need for a graphics system and methodology capable of compensating for this loss of color precision.

20

SUMMARY

A graphics system may be configured with a set of graphics accelerators (e.g., industry standard graphics accelerators) and a series of filtering units. Each of the graphics accelerators may couple to a corresponding one of the filtering units. Each of the graphics accelerators may be configured to (a) generate a stream of samples in response to received graphics primitives, (b) add a corresponding dither value to the color components of the samples to obtain dithered color components, (c) buffer the dithered color components in an internal frame buffer, and (d) forward truncated versions of the dithered color components to the corresponding filtering unit. The filtering units may be configured to perform a weighted averaging computation on the truncated dithered color components to determine pixel color components.

A host computer may broadcast a stream of graphics primitives to the set of graphics accelerators. Thus, each of the graphics accelerators may receive the same set of graphics primitives.

The dither values corresponding to the set of graphics accelerators may have an average value of $\frac{1}{2}$. When the dither value is added to a sample color component, the ones digit of the dither value is aligned with the least significant bit of the sample color component that is to survive truncation.

Each of the filtering units is configured to support the weighted averaging computation by computing a partial sums (one partial sum for each of red, green and blue) corresponding to a subset of the samples falling in a filter support region. The filtering units are configured to add the partial sums in a pipelined fashion. A last of the filtering units in the series may be programmably configured to normalize a set of final cumulative sums resulting from said addition of the partial sums in a pipelined fashion.

In another set of embodiments, a graphics system may be configured to include a set of rendering processors and a series of filtering units. Each of the rendering processors couples to a corresponding one of the filtering units. Each rendering processor $RP(K)$ of the set of rendering processors may be configured to (a) generate a stream of samples in response to received graphics primitives, (b) add a dither value D_K to a data

component (such as red, green, blue or alpha) of each the samples in the stream to obtain dithered data components, (c) buffer the dithered data components in an internal frame buffer, and (d) forward a truncated version of the dithered data components to the corresponding filtering unit. The filtering units are configured to perform a weighted averaging computation on the truncated dithered data components to determine pixel data components.

The rendering processors reside within original equipment manufacturer (OEM) graphics cards (i.e., graphics accelerators). Each of the graphics cards may contain one or more of the rendering processors.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A better understanding of the present invention can be obtained when the
5 following detailed description is considered in conjunction with the following drawings,
in which:

Figure 1A illustrates a collection C_{SP} of sample positions in a virtual screen space
according to one set of embodiments;

10 Figure 1B illustrates one embodiment of a subset T_K of sample positions used by
a corresponding graphics card $GC(K)$;

Figure 2 illustrates one embodiment for a set of sample positions generated by a
set of graphics cards in a given sample bin in virtual screen space;

Figure 3 illustrates one embodiment of a graphics system including a set of
industry standard graphics cards and a series of filtering units;

15 Figure 4 illustrates one embodiment of a set of virtual pixel centers generated by a
filtering unit $FU(K)$ in a virtual screen space;

Figure 5 illustrates one embodiment of a sample filtration computation used to
determine pixel values;

20 Figure 6 illustrates a portion of the sample filtration computation handled by a
single filtering unit according to one embodiment;

Figure 7 highlights the frame buffer $FB(K)$ and video data port $VDP(K)$ of
graphics card $GC(K)$ according to one set of embodiments;

Figure 8 presents a tabulated example of a spatial dithering process in a box
filtering mode;

25 Figure 9 illustrates one embodiment of a graphics system including a set of
graphics cards and a series of filtering units, where each of the graphics cards
contains two rendering processors;

Figure 10 illustrates a methodology for applying spatial dithering to sample data components in a graphics system.

While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms,
5 specific embodiments thereof are shown by way of example in the drawings and will
herein be described in detail. It should be understood, however, that the drawings and
detailed description thereto are not intended to limit the invention to the particular form
disclosed, but on the contrary, the intention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and
alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the present invention as defined by the
10 appended claims. Note, the headings are for organizational purposes only and are not
meant to be used to limit or interpret the description or claims. Furthermore, note that the
word “may” is used throughout this application in a permissive sense (i.e., having the
potential to, being able to), not a mandatory sense (i.e., must).” The term “include”, and
derivations thereof, mean “including, but not limited to”. The term “connected” means
15 “directly or indirectly connected”, and the term “coupled” means “directly or indirectly
connected”.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

This detailed description discloses various embodiments of a graphics system architecture that uses (a) a set S_{GC} of standard OEM graphics cards to generate samples and (b) a series S_{FU} of filtering units coupled to the OEM graphics cards. The series of filtering units receive samples from the OEM graphics cards and spatially filter the samples to generate video output pixels. OEM is an acronym for “original equipment manufacturer”.

Let N_{GC} denote the number of OEM graphics cards in the set S_{GC} . The OEM graphics cards of the set S_{GC} are denoted as $GC(0)$, $GC(1)$, $GC(2)$, ..., $GC(N_{GC}-1)$. The number N_{GC} is a positive integer.

Let N_{FU} denote the number of filtering units in the series S_{FU} . The filtering units of the series S_{FU} are denoted $FU(0)$, $FU(1)$, $FU(2)$, ..., $FU(N_{FU}-1)$. The number N_{FU} is a positive integer.

A host computer directs the broadcast of graphics data from host memory (i.e., a memory associated with the host computer) to the OEM graphics cards $GC(0)$, $GC(1)$, $GC(2)$, ..., $GC(N_{GC}-1)$. The graphics data may specify primitives such as polygons, lines and dots.

The graphics cards collaboratively generate samples corresponding to a collection C_{SP} of sample positions in a virtual screen space as suggested by Figure 1A. Virtual screen space may be interpreted as being partitioned into an array of bins, each bin being a 1×1 square. Let X_V and Y_V denote the coordinates of virtual screen space. The boundaries of the bins may be defined by lines of the form “ X_V equal to an integer” and lines of the form “ Y_V equal to an integer”. Each graphics card $GC(K)$ may generate samples corresponding to a subset T_K of the collection C_{SP} of sample positions. Each sample includes a set of data components such as red, green and blue color components. A sample may also include data components such as depth and/or alpha, blur value, brighter-than-bright value, etc.

It is noted that values $N_B=6$ and $M_B=7$ for the sizes of the spatial bin array have been chosen for the sake of illustration, and are much smaller than would typically be used in most applications.

In one set of embodiments, graphics card $GC(K)$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{GC}-1$, may generate samples for sample positions of the rectangular array

$$T_K = \{(I,J) + (V_X(K), V_Y(K)): I=0, 1, 2, \dots, M_B(K)-1, J=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_B(K)-1\}$$

as suggested by Figure 1B. $V_X(K)$ and $V_Y(K)$ represent the horizontal and vertical displacements of rectangular array T_K from the origin of virtual screen space. $M_B(K)$ is the horizontal array resolution, and $N_B(K)$ is the vertical array resolution. Each graphics card $GC(K)$ may include programmable registers which store the values $V_X(K)$, $V_Y(K)$, $M_B(K)$ and $N_B(K)$.

Host software may set all the vertical resolutions $V_Y(K)$ to a common value V_Y , set all the horizontal resolutions $M_B(K)$ equal to a common value M_B , and set the vector displacements $(V_X(K), V_Y(K))$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{GC}-1$, so that they reside in the unit square $U=\{(x,y): 0 \leq x,y < 1\}$. In particular, the vector displacements may be set so that they attain N_{GC} distinct positions within the unit square, e.g., positions that are uniformly distributed (or approximately uniformly distributed) over the unit square. Thus, for every I in the range $0, 1, 2, \dots, M_B-1$, and every J in the range $0, 1, 2, \dots, N_B-1$, the bin at bin address (I,J) contains a sample position $Q_K(I,J)=(I,J)+(V_X(K), V_Y(K))$ of the array T_K , $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{GC}-1$, as suggested by Figure 2 in the case $N_{GC}=16$.

The host computer may direct the broadcast of a stream of primitives corresponding to an animation frame to all the graphics cards. Each graphics card $GC(K)$ may receive the stream of primitives, compute (i.e., render) samples at the sample positions of the rectangular array T_K based on the received primitives, temporarily store the samples in an internal frame buffer, and then, forward the samples from the internal frame buffer to a corresponding one of the filtering units. The samples (i.e., the color components of the samples) may experience a loss of precision in the process of buffering and forwarding. The sample rendering hardware in graphics card $GC(K)$ may compute each sample color components with P_1 bits of precision. However, the frame buffer may be configured to store each sample color component with P_2 bits of precision, where P_2 is smaller than P_1 . Thus, sample color components experience a loss of (P_2-P_1) bits of precision in the process of being stored into the internal frame buffer.

It is noted that graphics cards typically allow the displacement values $V_X(K)$ and $V_Y(K)$ to take values over a wider range than merely the interval $[0,1)$. Thus, the

example given above and the configurations shown in Figures 1A, 1B and 2 are meant to be suggestive and not limiting. Some or all of the vector displacements ($V_X(K), V_Y(K)$), $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{GC}-1$, may be assigned positions outside the unit square.

In one set of embodiments, a graphics system may be configured with one
5 filtering unit per graphics card (i.e., $N_{GC}=N_{FU}$) as suggested by Figure 3. Each filtering unit $FU(K)$ receives a stream H_K of samples from the corresponding graphics card $GC(K)$. The stream H_K contains samples computed on the subset T_K of sample positions.

As suggested by Figure 4, each filtering unit $FU(K)$ may scan through virtual
10 screen space in raster fashion generating virtual pixel centers denoted by the small plus markers, and generating a set of partial sums (e.g., one partial sum for each color plus a partial sum for filter coefficients) at each of the virtual pixel centers based on one or more samples from the stream H_K in the neighborhood of the virtual pixel center. Recall that samples of the stream H_K correspond to samples positions of the subset T_K . These sample positions are denoted as small circles in Figure 4. (The virtual pixel centers are
15 also referred to as filter centers or convolutions centers.) The filtering units are coupled in a series to facilitate the pipelined accumulation of the sets of partial sums for each video output pixel.

The array $A_{PC}(K)$ of virtual pixel centers traversed by the filtering unit $FU(K)$ may be characterized by the following programmable parameters: a horizontal spacing
20 $\Delta X(K)$, a vertical spacing $\Delta Y(K)$, a horizontal start displacement $X_{Start}(K)$, a vertical start displacement $Y_{Start}(K)$, a horizontal resolution $N_H(K)$ and a vertical resolution $N_V(K)$. The horizontal resolution $N_H(K)$ is the number of virtual pixel centers in a horizontal line of the array $A_{PC}(K)$. The vertical resolution $N_V(K)$ is the number of virtual pixel centers in the vertical line of the array $A_{PC}(K)$. Filtering unit $FU(K)$ includes registers for
25 programmably setting the parameters $\Delta X(K)$, $\Delta Y(K)$, $X_{Start}(K)$, $Y_{Start}(K)$, $N_H(K)$ and $N_V(K)$. Host software may set these parameters so that the arrays $A_{PC}(K)$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{FU}-1$, are identical.

The filtering units collaborate to compute a video pixel P at a particular virtual pixel center as suggested by Figure 5. The video pixel is computed based on a filtration
30 of samples corresponding to sample positions (of the collection C_{SP}) within a support region centered on (or defined by) the virtual pixel center. Each filtering unit $FU(K)$

performs a respective portion of the sample filtration. (The sample positions falling within the support region are denoted as small black dots. In contrast, sample positions outside the support region are denoted as small circles.) Each sample S corresponding to a sample position Q within the support region may be assigned a filter coefficient C_S based on the sample position Q. The filter coefficient C_S may be function of the spatial displacement between the sample position Q and the virtual pixel center. In some embodiments, the filter coefficient C_S is a function of the radial distance between the sample position Q and the virtual pixel center.

Each of the color components (r_P , g_P , b_P) of the video pixel may be determined by computing a weighted summation of the corresponding sample color components of the samples falling inside the filter support region. (A sample is said to fall inside the filter support region when its corresponding sample position falls inside the filter support region.) For example, a red summation value r_P for the video pixel P may be computed according to the expression

$$r_P = \sum C_S r_S, \quad (1)$$

where the summation ranges over each sample S in the filter support region, and where r_S is the red sample value of the sample S. In other words, the red component of each sample S in the filter support region is multiplied by the corresponding filter coefficient C_S , and the resulting products are summed. Similar weighted summations are performed to determine a green summation value g_P and a blue summation value b_P for the video pixel P based respectively on the green color components g_S and the blue color components b_S of the samples:

$$g_P = \sum C_S g_S, \quad (1')$$

$$b_P = \sum C_S b_S, \quad (1'')$$

Furthermore, a normalization value E_P (i.e., a coefficient summation value) may be computed by adding up the filter coefficients C_S for the samples S in the filter support region, i.e.,

$$E_P = \sum C_S. \quad (2)$$

The summation values may then be multiplied by the reciprocal of E_P (or equivalently, divided by E_P) to determine normalized pixel values:

$$R_P = (1/E_P) * r_P \quad (3)$$

$$G_P = (1/E_P) * g_P \quad (4)$$

$$5 \quad B_P = (1/E_P) * b_P \quad (5)$$

To implement the computation described above, each of the filtering units $FU(K)$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{FU}-1$, may compute partial sums $PS_r(K)$, $PS_g(K)$, $PS_b(K)$ and $PS_E(K)$ for the video pixel P based on the samples from its input stream H_K that correspond to sample positions interior to the filter support as suggested by Figure 6. Filtering unit
10 $FU(K)$ may include (or couple to) an input buffer $INB(K)$ (not shown) which serves to buffer N_{LB} horizontal scan lines of samples from the input stream H_K . The parameter N_{LB} may be greater than or equal to the vertical bin size of a bin neighborhood containing the filter support. The bin neighborhood may be a rectangle (or square) of bins. For example, in one embodiment the bin neighborhood is a 5×5 array of bins centered on the
15 bin which contains the virtual pixel position as suggested by Figure 6.

The summation values r_P , g_P , b_P and E_P are developed cumulatively in the series of filtering units as follows. Each filtering unit $FU(K)$, $K=1, 2, 3, \dots, N_{FU}-2$, receives cumulative sums $CS_r(K-1)$, $CS_g(K-1)$, $CS_b(K-1)$ and $CS_E(K-1)$ from a previous filtering unit $FU(K-1)$, adds its partial sums to the received cumulative sums respectively to form
20 updated cumulative sums according to the relations

$$CS_r(K) = CS_r(K-1) + PS_r(K)$$

$$CS_g(K) = CS_g(K-1) + PS_g(K)$$

$$CS_b(K) = CS_b(K-1) + PS_b(K)$$

$$CS_E(K) = CS_E(K-1) + PS_E(K),$$

25 and transmits the updated cumulative sums to the next filtering unit $FU(K+1)$.

The first filtering unit $FU(0)$ assigns the values of the partial sums $PS_r(0)$, $PS_g(0)$, $PS_b(0)$ and $PS_E(0)$ to the cumulative sums $CS_r(0)$, $CS_g(0)$, $CS_b(0)$ and $CS_E(0)$ respectively, and transmits these cumulative sums to filtering unit $FU(1)$.

The last filtering unit $FU(N_{FU}-1)$ receives cumulative sums $CS_r(N_{FU}-2)$, $CS_g(N_{FU}-2)$, $CS_b(N_{FU}-2)$ and $CS_E(N_{FU}-2)$ from the previous filtering unit $FU(N_{FU}-2)$, adds the
30 partial sums $PS_r(N_{FU}-1)$, $PS_g(N_{FU}-1)$, $PS_b(N_{FU}-1)$ and $PS_E(N_{FU}-1)$ to the received

cumulative sums respectively to form final cumulative sums $CS_r(N_{FU-1})$, $CS_g(N_{FU-1})$, $CS_b(N_{FU-1})$ and $CS_E(N_{FU-1})$ according to the relations

$$\begin{aligned} CS_r(N_{FU-1}) &= CS_r(N_{FU-2}) + PS_r(N_{FU-1}) \\ CS_g(N_{FU-1}) &= CS_g(N_{FU-2}) + PS_g(N_{FU-1}) \\ 5 \quad CS_b(N_{FU-1}) &= CS_b(N_{FU-2}) + PS_b(N_{FU-1}) \\ CS_E(N_{FU-1}) &= CS_E(N_{FU-2}) + PS_E(N_{FU-1}). \end{aligned}$$

These final cumulative sums are the summation values described above, i.e.,

$$\begin{aligned} r_P &= CS_r(N_{FU-1}) \\ g_P &= CS_g(N_{FU-1}) \\ 10 \quad b_P &= CS_b(N_{FU-1}) \\ E_P &= CS_E(N_{FU-1}). \end{aligned}$$

Furthermore, the last filtering unit $FU(N_{FU-1})$ may be programmably configured to perform the normalizing computations to determine the color components R_P , G_P and B_P of the video pixel P :

$$\begin{aligned} 15 \quad R_P &= (1/E_P) * r_P \\ G_P &= (1/E_P) * g_P \\ B_P &= (1/E_P) * b_P. \end{aligned}$$

In this fashion, the series of filtering units collaborate to generate each video pixel in a stream of video pixels. The series of filtering units may be driven by a common pixel
20 clock. Furthermore, each filtering unit may transmit cumulative sums to the next filtering unit using source-synchronous signaling. The last filtering unit $FU(N_{FU-1})$ may forward the stream of video pixels to a digital-to-analog (D/A) conversion device. The D/A conversion device converts the video pixel stream to an analog video signal and provides the analog video signal to an analog output port accessible by one or more display
25 devices. Alternatively, the last filtering unit $FU(N_{FU-1})$ may forward the video pixel stream to a digital video output port accessible by one or more display devices.

The filter coefficient C_S for a sample S in the filter support region may be determined by a table lookup. For example, a radially symmetric filter may be realized by a filter coefficient table, which is addressed by a function of the sample's radial distance
30 with respect to the virtual pixel center. The filter support for a radially symmetric filter

may be a circular disk as suggested by the example of Figure 6. (The support of a filter is the region in virtual screen space on which the filter is defined.) The terms “filter” and “kernel” are used as synonyms herein. Let R_f denote the radius of the circular support disk.

5 Filtering unit $FU(K)$ may access a sample S corresponding to the bin neighborhood from its input buffer $INB(K)$. (Recall that the samples stored in the input buffer $INB(K)$ are received from graphics card $GC(K)$ and correspond to sample positions of the subset T_K). Filtering unit $FU(K)$ may compute the square radius $(D_S)^2$ of the sample’s position (X_S, Y_S) with respect to the virtual pixel center (X_P, Y_P) according to
10 the expression

$$(D_S)^2 = (X_S - X_P)^2 + (Y_S - Y_P)^2.$$

The square radius $(D_S)^2$ may be compared to the square radius $(R_f)^2$ of the filter support. If the sample’s square radius is less than (or, in a different embodiment, less than or equal to) the filter’s square radius, the sample S may be marked as being valid (i.e., inside the
15 filter support). Otherwise, the sample S may be marked as invalid.

Filtering unit $FU(K)$ may compute a normalized square radius U_S for a valid sample S by multiplying the sample’s square radius by the reciprocal of the filter’s square radius:

$$U_S = (D_S)^2 \frac{1}{(R_f)^2}.$$

20 The normalized square radius U_S may be used to access the filter coefficient table for the filter coefficient C_S . The filter coefficient table may store filter coefficients indexed by the normalized square radius.

In various embodiments, the filter coefficient table is implemented in RAM and is programmable by host software. Thus, the filter function (i.e., the filter kernel) used in
25 the filtering process may be changed as needed or desired. Similarly, the square radius $(R_f)^2$ of the filter support and the reciprocal square radius $1/(R_f)^2$ of the filter support may be programmable. Each filtering unit $FU(K)$ may include its own filter coefficient table.

Because the entries in the filter coefficient table are indexed according to normalized square distance, they need not be updated when the radius R_f of the filter

support changes. The filter coefficients and the filter radius may be modified independently.

In one embodiment, the filter coefficient table may be addressed with the sample radius D_s at the expense of computing a square root of the square radius $(D_s)^2$. In another embodiment, the square radius may be converted into a floating-point format, and the floating-point square radius may be used to address the filter coefficient table. It is noted that the filter coefficient table may be indexed by any of various radial distance measures. For example, an L^1 norm or L^∞ norm may be used to measure the distance between a sample position and the virtual pixel center.

Invalid samples may be assigned the value zero for their filter coefficients. Thus, the invalid samples end up making a null contribution to the pixel value summations. In other embodiments, filtering hardware internal to the filtering unit $FU(K)$ may be configured to ignore invalid samples. Thus, in these embodiments, it is not necessary to assign filter coefficients to the invalid samples.

In some embodiments, the filtering units may support multiple filtering modes. For example, in one collection of embodiments, each filtering unit supports a box filtering mode as well as a radially symmetric filtering mode. In the box filtering mode, the filtering units may implement a box filter over a rectangular support region, e.g., a square support region with radius R_f (i.e. side length $2R_f$). Thus, the filtering units may compute boundary coordinates for the support square according to the expressions X_P+R_f , X_P-R_f , Y_P+R_f , and Y_P-R_f . Each sample S in the bin neighborhood may be marked as being valid if the sample's position (X_S, Y_S) falls within the support square, i.e., if

$$X_P-R_f < X_S < X_P+R_f \text{ and}$$

$$Y_P-R_f < Y_S < Y_P+R_f.$$

Otherwise the sample S may be marked as invalid. Each valid sample may be assigned the same filter weight value (e.g., $C_S=1$). It is noted that any or all of the strict inequalities ($<$) in the system above may be replaced with permissive inequalities (\leq). Various embodiments along these lines are contemplated.

The filtering units may use any of a variety of filters either alone or in combination to compute pixel values from sample values. For example, the filtering units may use a box filter, a tent filter, a cone filter, a cylinder filter, a Gaussian filter, a

Catmull-Rom filter, a Mitchell-Netravali filter, a windowed sinc filter, or in general, any form of band pass filter or any of various approximations to the sinc filter.

Loss of Sample Color Precision

5 As described above, the filtering units $FU(0)$, $FU(1)$, $FU(2)$, ..., $FU(N_{FU}-1)$ collaborate to perform a spatial filtration (i.e., an averaging computation) on the color components (r_s , g_s , b_s) of samples as received from the graphics cards in order to generate corresponding pixel color components (R_p , G_p , B_p). However, it is important to note that the precision of the sample color components as received by the filtering units
10 may be smaller than the precision used in the graphics cards to originally compute the sample color components.

Graphics card $GC(K)$ includes an internal frame buffer $FB(K)$ and a video data port $VDP(K)$ through which the graphics card $GC(K)$ is configured to output video data as suggested by Figure 7. The video data port $VDP(K)$ is used to transfer the stream H_K
15 of samples (corresponding to sample positions of the subset T_K) to the filtering unit $FU(K)$. Thus, filtering unit $FU(K)$ couples to the video data port $VDP(K)$.

In some embodiments, graphics card $GC(K)$ may compute the color components of samples (corresponding to sample positions of the subset T_K) at a first precision P_1 , temporarily store the sample color components in frame buffer $FB(K)$, and then forward
20 the sample color components from the frame buffer $FB(K)$ to filtering unit $FU(K)$ through the video data port $VDP(K)$. In the process of buffering and forwarding, the sample color components are truncated down to a second lower precision P_2 imposed by the frame buffer $FB(K)$ and/or the video data port $VDP(K)$. For example, a video data port conforming to the Digital Video Interface (DVI) specification may allow only 8 bits
25 per color component, especially for video formats with **video clock rate** greater than 166 MHz.

Let R_s , G_s and B_s denote the color components of a sample S as computed by the graphics card $GC(K)$ at the first precision P_1 . Let $Trn(R_s)$, $Trn(G_s)$ and $Trn(B_s)$ represent the truncated sample color components as sent to the filtering unit (through the sample
30 stream H_K) at the second lower precision P_2 . Thus, the (P_1-P_2) least significant bits of X are missing from $Trn(X)$, where $X=R_s$, G_s , B_s .

Filtering unit FU(K) computes its partial sums based on the truncated color components Trn(R_S), Trn(G_S) and Trn(B_S) received from the video data port VDP(K). In other words, the truncated color components Trn(R_S), Trn(G_S) and Trn(B_S) take the roles of r_S, g_S and b_S respectively in the filtration computation described above.

5 In another set of embodiments, instead of mere truncation, graphics card GC(K) may be configured to round the color components R_S, G_S and B_S of each computed sample S to the nearest state of the lower precision operand (i.e., the precision P₂ operand). Graphics card GC(K) may implement the rounding by adding $w=1/2$ to the color components R_S, G_S and B_S prior to the truncating action of buffering and forwarding to
10 the filtering unit FU(K). The value $w=1/2$ is aligned so that the ones bit position of operand w corresponds to the least significant bit of the color component R_S, G_S or B_S that survives the truncation. In this case, filtering unit FU(K) computes its partial sums based on the rounded color components Trn(R_S+1/2), Trn(G_S+1/2) and Trn(B_S+1/2). The rounding algorithm induces less error on average than the pure truncation algorithm.

15 Dithering to Recover Added Precision

In one set of embodiments, the set of graphics cards GC(0), GC(1), ..., GC(N_{GC}-1) may apply a spatial dithering operation to the sample color components prior to buffering and forwarding the sample color components to the filtering units. Each
20 graphics card GC(K), K=0, 1, 2, ..., N_{GC}-1, may be programmably configured to add a dither value D_K to the sample color components R_S, G_S, B_S of each computed sample S to generate dithered sample color components R_S', G_S', B_S' according to the relations:

$$\begin{aligned} R_S' &= R_S + D_K \\ G_S' &= G_S + D_K \\ B_S' &= B_S + D_K. \end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

25 These additions may be implemented using a programmable pixel shader in the graphics card GC(K). (Any of a variety of modern OEM graphics cards include programmable pixel shaders.) The dithered color values R_S', G_S' and B_S' of the sample S are then buffered and forwarded to the filtering unit FU(K) through the video data port VDP(K)
30 instead of the originally computed color values R_S, G_S and B_S. In the process of buffering and forwarding, the dithered color values R_S', G_S' and B_S' get truncated down to the lower

precision values $\text{Trn}(R_S')$, $\text{Trn}(G_S')$ and $\text{Trn}(B_S')$. It is these truncated values $\text{Trn}(R_S')$, $\text{Trn}(G_S')$ and $\text{Trn}(B_S')$ that are output from the video data port $\text{VDP}(K)$ in the stream H_K and received by the filtering unit $\text{FU}(K)$. Thus, the filtering unit $\text{FU}(K)$ computes its partial sums based on the truncated color values $\text{Trn}(R_S')$, $\text{Trn}(G_S')$ and $\text{Trn}(B_S')$. The series of filtering units $\text{FU}(0)$, $\text{FU}(1)$, ..., $\text{FU}(N_{\text{FU}}-1)$ compute the color components of a video pixel P by accumulating the partial sums and normalizing the final sum as described above. The dithering operation allows the pixel color components computed by the series of filtering units to more closely approximate the ideal pixel color components which would be obtained from performing the same summation and normalization computations on the original high-precision (i.e., precision P_1) sample color components R_S , B_S and G_S .

The set of dither values D_K , $K=0, 1, \dots, N_{\text{GC}}-1$, may be configured to have an average value of $\frac{1}{2}$ (or approximately $\frac{1}{2}$). In some embodiments, the set of dither values may approximate a uniform distribution of numbers between $\frac{1}{2}-A$ and $\frac{1}{2}+A$, where A is a rational number greater than or equal to one. The dither radius A may be programmable. In one particular embodiment, A equals one. In the dithering summations (6), the least significant bit position of the sample color values R_S , G_S and B_S which is to survive truncation is aligned with the ones bit position of the dither value operand. Equivalently, the most significant bit position of the sample color values which gets discarded in the truncation is aligned with the $\frac{1}{2}$ bit position of the dither value operand.

Tabulated Example of Spatial Dithering

Figure 8 presents a tabulated example of the beneficial effects of spatial dithering the red color channel in the case where a series of 16 filtering units are configured to perform a box filtering on the samples in each bin to determine video pixels. The tabulated example focuses on the red color channel, but it is to be understood that spatial dithering may be applied to any or all of the color channels and non-color channels such as alpha.

Host software may perform a series of register writes to set array parameters $X_{\text{Start}}(K)=1/2$, $Y_{\text{Start}}(K)=1/2$ and $\Delta X(K)=\Delta Y(K)=1$, for $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, 15$. Furthermore,

host software may set a filter mode control register in each filter unit to an appropriate value to turn on box filtering.

Each graphics card GC(K) computes a red color value R_K for a sample S_K at a sample position Q_K in a given bin as suggested by Figure 2. An exemplary set of
5 computed red values R_K are given in the second column of Figure 8. Graphics card GC(K) adds dither value D_K to the red value R_K to obtain dithered red value $R'_K = R_K + D_K$. An exemplary set of dither values D_K are shown in the third column. The dither values D_K are chosen to have an average value of $\frac{1}{2}$ approximately.

In the process of buffering and forwarding the dithered red value R'_K to filtering
10 unit FU(K), the fractional part of the dithered red value R'_K is discarded leaving only the integer part as the truncated dithered value $\text{Trn}(R'_K)$. The filtering units collaboratively accumulate a summation S_{TD} of the truncated dithered values $\text{Trn}(R'_K)$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, 15$. The summation S_{TD} equals 147. This departs by only a small amount (i.e., $1/8$) from the summation S_{RED} of the originally computed red values R_K , $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, 15$; S_{RED} equals
15 147.125. In contrast, the summation S_{RND} of the rounded red values $\text{Trn}(R_K + 1/2)$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, 15$, is equal to 144, much further from "truth", i.e., the summation S_{RED} .

Thus, spatial dithering may allow the averages of the color values (or, more generally, sample component values) to more be more faithfully preserved through truncation than simple rounding without spatial dithering. It is noted that the advantages
20 of dithering may be more pronounced when the original sample color values are tightly clustered about their average value.

The above tabulated example assumes box filtering of the samples with virtual pixel centers constrained to the centers of sample bins by setting $X_{\text{Start}}(K)=1/2$, $Y_{\text{Start}}(K)=1/2$ and $\Delta X(K)=\Delta Y(K)=1$, for $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, 15$. However, it is noted that
25 spatial dithering may be applied more generally with any of various types of filtering. For example, spatial dithering may be applied with any of a wide variety of radially symmetric filters obtainable by programming the filtering coefficient tables in the filter units. In addition, spatial dithering may be applied with box filtering and arbitrary values of $X_{\text{Start}}(K)$, $Y_{\text{Start}}(K)$, $\Delta X(K)$ and $\Delta Y(K)$.

30 For additional disclosure on the subject of spatial dithering, please refer to U.S. Patent Application No. 09/760,512, filed on January 11, 2001, entitled "Recovering

Added Precision from L-Bit Samples by Dithering the Samples Prior to an Averaging Computation”, invented by Nathaniel David Naegle. This patent application is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

5 Two Render Processors per Graphics Card

Some currently available OEM graphics cards are equipped with two graphics processors and two corresponding video data ports (e.g., DVI ports). Thus, in one set of embodiments, a series of such dual-processor graphics cards $DC(0)$, $DC(1)$, $DC(2)$, ..., $DC(N_{DC}-1)$ may be configured to feed the series of filtering units $FU(0)$, $FU(1)$, $FU(2)$,
10 ..., $FU(2N_{DC}-1)$ as suggested Figure 9 in the $N_{DC}=4$. In general, N_{DC} may be any positive integer. Host software may program the dual-processor graphics card $DC(K)$, $K=0, 1, 2, \dots, N_{DC}-1$, to generate the streams H_{2K} and H_{2K+1} of dithered samples corresponding to sample positions subsets T_{2K} and T_{2K+1} respectively. The sample streams H_{2K} and H_{2K+1} are supplied to filtering units $FU(2K)$ and $FU(2K+1)$ in parallel through the two video
15 data ports respectively. In particular, host software may program the dual-processor graphics card $DC(K)$ so that its first graphics processor generates sample stream H_{2K} and its second graphics processor generates sample stream H_{2K+1} .

Spatial Dithering Methodology

20 In one set of embodiments, a method for generating graphical images may be arranged as indicated in Figure 10. In step 1000, a host computer may broadcast a stream of graphics primitives to a set of rendering processors.

In step 1010, each rendering processor $RP(K)$ of said set of rendering processors generates a stream of samples in response to the received graphics primitives. The
25 samples of the generated stream correspond to sample positions of the subset T_K as described above.

In step 1020, each rendering processor $RP(K)$ adds a dither value D_K to a data component (such as red, green, blue or alpha) of each the samples in the generated stream to obtain dithered data components. The dither values may have an average value of $\frac{1}{2}$
30 and a dither radius greater than or equal to one.

In step 1030, each rendering processor RP(K) buffers the dithered data components in an internal frame buffer, and forwards a truncated version of the dithered data components to a corresponding filtering unit. The filtering units may be coupled together in a series.

5 In step 1040, the filtering units perform a weighted averaging computation in a pipelined fashion on the truncated dithered data components to determine pixel data components. The data components are usable to determine at least a portion of a displayable image.

10 Numerous variations and modifications will become apparent to those skilled in the art once the above disclosure is fully appreciated. It is intended that the following claims be interpreted to embrace all such variations and modifications.

15